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ABSTRACT

The way in which findings from a statewide study on permanency planning were utilized and integrated within an accredited undergraduate social work curriculum is described. The concept of permanency planning (through the provision of in-home services to help the child remain in his/her biological home or the removal of the child and placement in an adoptive home) is discussed briefly, together with the background of the 1983 consent decree in New Mexico requiring the restructuring of the state's foster care and adoption system. In 1984 a study was conducted to describe the foster care system in New Mexico. Findings revealed problems in: recruitment and maintenance of foster families, emancipation training for older children, identification of incest and sexually abusive families, dealing with attorneys, special needs children, number of past workers for each child, and legal consultation. The study identified some areas that need more integration into the curriculum, such as the importance of legal consultation and the necessity of professional training for child welfare workers. The ways in which this has been done in the human behavior and social environment courses, the social work research course, policy courses, field internships, special topics courses, and the three practice courses in the Bachelor of Social Work curriculum at New Mexico State University are described. Through case examples, students learn critical aspects of permanency planning in the practice courses. In the research course, students manipulate and analyze the data and thus are able to see how research can directly impact policy change. Findings from the study also are used as illustrations in courses. (KM)

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A PERMANENCY PLANNING STUDY: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE CURRICULUM

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A PERMANENCY PLANNING STUDY: IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE CURRICULUM

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The ties of social work with child welfare, particularly foster care, have historically been strong. In recent years, the focus of research and practice in foster care have been on the issue of permanency planning. Recently, social workers have been questioning how much attention is being paid to foster care by social work educators (Meyer, 1984). This paper demonstrates how findings from a state wide study on permanency planning were utilized and integrated within an accredited undergraduate social work curriculum.

The study examined all children who had been in foster care in New Mexico for one year or longer. The data for this study were collected by the first author during 1984, while serving as a consultant to the Department of Human Services, and were later analyzed at New Mexico State University. Before the methodology and results of this study are described, and the curriculum implications presented, the issue of permanency planning and its history will be discussed.

PERMANENCY PLANNING

The goal of permanency planning is a safe and nurturing permanent home for each child. This can be accomplished in two ways. First, the provision of in-home services to help the child remain in his/her own biological home; second, the removal of the child from his/her biological home and termination of parental rights and placement in an adoptive home. The philosophy of permanency planning is a commitment to the vital role the family plays in a child's development, preferably, the biological family. Unfortunately, as many studies have demonstrated, the support services necessary for adequate in-home service care are severely lacking in many states. Therefore, the main thrust has been to remove the child, whether temporarily or permanently, from the family rather than attempting to prevent the conditions or situations which resulted in the family initially experiencing difficulties. Thus, the concepts of permanency planning have become centered on the foster care system itself, rather than on the prevention of any type of substitute care. The issues of identifying and removing barriers to adoption, involving biological parents in case planning, and facilitating early reunification have become the topics of investigations that have attempted to develop procedures to improve practice in this area. (Stein, Gambrill and Wilkse, 1978; Jones, Newman and Shyne, 1976). In part, it was these studies that impacted upon policy changes relating to foster care.

Policy in this area has been influential in two major ways. First, by social legislation through the Child Welfare Act, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act in 1980 (PL 96-272), and the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 (PL 95-608); and second, by federal law suits and some precedence setting cases. The use of law suits to dictate fundamental changes in the foster care system has been widely reported in the media. Often the media cite case examples to illustrate children who are "set adrift in foster care." An example of one such case follows.

The story of Joseph, eleven, and his sister, Josephine, ten, is fairly typical for many thousands of children in American who are lost in the legal and psychological limbo of long term foster care. These children, at the ages of one and a half and six months respectively, were removed from their biological home by the court, based upon evidence presented by social services of severe physical abuse. They were placed in the custody of the New Mexico Department of Human Services. Subsequently, their mother moved to another state where another of her children died under mysterious circumstances. At one point, the mother had not contacted Joseph or Josephine for a period of five years, and under New Mexico law, grounds existed for termination of her parental rights based upon abandonment. Unfortunately, during the ten years of foster care, neither Joseph nor Josephine were freed for adoption or referred to a foster adoptive home.

From 1978 to 1980, New Mexico had instituted a pilot program based on the Oregon Permanency Planning Project in an attempt to institutionalize permanency planning in the state and prevent such a case as this from occurring. But in 1983, after hearing the stories of Joseph and Josephine and five other youngsters in custody of the New Mexico Human Services Department, federal judge, Juan Burciaga, placed the entire New Mexico foster care and adoption system under direct federal control for a minimum of five years. A twenty-nine page consent decree that requires a comprehensive restructuring of the social service division's foster care and adoption system was seen as a way of introducing permanency planning techniques into a "woefully backward system." Under this consent decree, virtually every aspect of the state's foster care system is to be redesigned. This consent decree is the most comprehensive in the United States to date. Additional suits had been brought in Missouri, which resulted in federal court action in Jackson County, that mandated the design and implementation of safeguards to protect children in foster care. Part of the Missouri order is that no plan of long term foster care for children under the age of fifteen be allowed.

The New Mexico federal consent decree is very precise in identifying how the system is to be restructured. Major components include the following.

1. Employee qualifications. The qualifications for child welfare workers and supervisors include at

least a BSW or a related degree.

2. Social work training. The state must establish extensive and comprehensive training programs for workers and supervisors in order that their basic case work decisions are consistent and directed toward permanency for all children.

3. Case load. The number of foster care cases any social worker will be required to maintain is limited to twenty families of thirty-five children maximum.

4. Case planning. Permanent plans for children must be very specific and are subject to internal reviews by social work consultants.

5. Adoptions. The method in which children are matched to prospective adoptive families has strict time limits for linking children with adoptive families. Home studies must be completed within four months.In addition, extensive efforts must be made by the department to recruit families for hard to place children.

6. Legal services. The department is required to hire additional lawyers to handle cases.

7. Computerization. The Department of Human Services is required to develop and install a comprehensive data processing system in order to track children through the foster care system and monitor their treatment. Nine citizen review boards were required in all court districts to have access to case files and authority to submit reports to the local family court on a six months basis. Children whose parental rights have been terminated and who are waiting for adoption are also reviewed by citizen's review board.

A monitor is required to ensure compliance, and is jointly selected by the plaintiffs in the Department of Human Services and paid for by the department. The monitor conducts a quarterly audit and evaluation to determine the progress the department is making toward complying with the consent decree.

In addition to the impact on practice, there are several legal implications of this ruling. First, this is

the first time a federal court judge recognized a child's federal constitutional right to have a foster care system that is rationally designed and sufficiently run to afford a child a reasonable chance of being adopted or returned home. Second, the court imposed sanctions on the department as a result of its record keeping deficiencies. Apart from the department lacking information on how the children's treatment plans were progressing, the department even lacked information on the number of children in their care. Third, the court held that the top level foster care administrators can be held liable for damages either through neglect, or lack of knowledge that the foster care system was inadequate.

This federal court order had just become law prior to the permanency planning study conducted in 1984.

METHOD

Early in 1984, the first author, in conjunction with the Director of Social Services, designed a study to describe the foster care system in New Mexico and to review all children who had been in care one year or longer. This description would include an assessment of the extent to which the goal of permanency planning, as defined within the federal consent decree and PL 96-272, was being met in New Mexico. If this goal was not being met satisfactorily, an assessment would be made of those factors which were impeding the process. In consultation with county office

managers, attorneys and other state's social service administrators, a two page data collection form was designed. The form was pretested in two counties, modified, and then used with all counties in the state. New Mexico's state foster care system is organized through sixteen county offices, which represent the thirty-four New Mexico counties. Each county office was visited by the first author and an attorney (who also possessed a Ph.D. in sociology) with extensive national background in child welfare legal issues. Supervisors from other counties helped review the cases and sat in on many of the staffings. The department's computerized tracking system listing of children by county was used to identify children for review. Updates were requested from each county. During this process it was found that the tracking system had about a 25% error, due primarily to not being updated. Each county office identified children in their care for one year or longer. A graduate and three undergraduate students helped to process the paper work and schedule the case reviews. The review team read every case in detail, completed the two page questionnaire and then staffed each case with the worker, and in most cases their supervisors, to ensure the accuracy of the information. Recommendations were made from social service and legal perspectives regarding the permanency plan for each child. In approximately fifty percent of these cases, the Social Worker V (who possessed an MSW), followed up on the recommendations and reported to

the state office on the implementation of the plan. The questionnaires were coded by students at New Mexico State University and the computer analysis conducted under the direction of the second author.

RESULTS

The results consisted of two types: first, data that was more qualitative in nature, and second, the qualitative results of the computer analysis.

The qualitative data were provided through the staffings and the interviewing of social workers on a case by case basis. In addition, reports were made by the first author to the Director of Social Services. Much of this information was then used by the Director to implement changes within the Department. Follow-ups on selected cases permanency plans were also carried out.

These qualitative findings can be summarized as follows:

* Inadequate recruitment and maintenance of foster families.
* No uniform method of process recording or ability to build a legal record.
* No emancipation training for older children.
* Inability to identify incest and sexual abusive families, even though key dynamics were addressed.
* Problems with attorneys:
    1. Attorneys do not know Children's Code.
    2. Attorneys have a "plea bargin" mentality and

over use consent decrees.

3. Social Workers are easily intimidated by attorneys.

* Social Workers have inadequate training in permanency planning theory and practice.
* Child Protective Service cases not actively investigated.

The quantitative results were extensive and these data are still in the process of being analyzed. A summary of some of these results follows:

(1) Number in foster care - In 1983, just under 700 children were in foster care for one year or longer in New Mexico. For 586 of these children, data was available for analysis, and the following results are based on these 586 cases. For the other approximately 140 children, those residing in San Juan and Otero Counties, the information is not available for the analysis.

(2) Age - The mean age of children in foster care was 11.8 years; the median age was 13 years. The highest percentage (10.6%) for any one age was eighteen years.

(3) Special needs - 29.7% of the children had special needs; the greatest proportion were emotionally disturbed (28.1%).

(4) Length of placement - The mean length of placement was 4.7 years (the median was 3 years).

(5) Number of placements - The mean number of prior

placements was 3.3 (the median was 3), 2.7% of the children had nine prior placements or more.

(6) Number of past workers - The mean number of past workers for each child was 2.8 (the median was 2). 19.3% of the children had 4 or more workers.

(7) Voluntary versus court ordered placements - 72% of the children were in court ordered placements.

(8) Termination of parental rights - 22.4% of the children in care had parental rights for both parents terminated; one parent had terminated rights in 13.8% of the cases, and for 50.2% neither parent had terminated rights.

(9) Legal consultation - In 63.3% of the cases, no legal consultation had been sought.

(10) Permanency plan - Part of collecting the data on the children in this study, as already discussed, involved ensuring that a permanency plan was made for each child. For 5.2% of the children, no plan was made. Return home was the plan for 22.7%; adopt for 35.2%; permanent foster care for 10.7%; independent living or emancipation for 26.4%, and custody to a relative for .5%.

Some of these data appear in line with the American Public Welfare Association findings (Tatara and Pettiford, 1985) in their nationwide study. Nevertheless, the data are not completely comparable, as the APWA study included all children in foster care, not just those who had been in care

one year or longer. This difference in sample may account for some rather marked differences which occur between the findings. In New Mexico, 36.2% of the children had both or one of the parents rights terminated; in the APWA study, this was the case for only 12.2% of the children. Other differences include the type of placement, whether court ordered or voluntary. In New Mexico, the number of court ordered placements (72%) was lower than the national sample (90.2%). The number of prior placements were also different - in New Mexico this was the first placement for only 16.4%, and in the APWA study this was the case for 45.8% of the children.

CURRICULUM

Both the circumstances leading up to the study, including the consent decree, and the study itself, including data collection, analysis and results, provided information that essentially confirmed that the content of the existing child welfare curriculum was relevant and current. In addition, the study provided current data on the state of foster care in New Mexico enabling faculty to illustrate child welfare issues with data that was immediately relevant to the students. Nevertheless, the study also identified some central areas that clearly needed to become more thoroughly integrated into the curriculum; areas such as the importance of legal consultation and the

necessity of professional training for child welfare workers.

Human Behavior and Social Environment

The human behavior and social environment content is taught in two sequential courses. They are taught from a life span perspective, using systems theory as an integrating framework. The courses strongly emphasize the cultural systems of the Southwest and their impact upon human growth and development. Child development is viewed from this multi-cultural perspective, a perspective which, it is anticipated, will guide the student through the process of assessment. Part of the course is devoted to examining life crises encountered at each of the developmental stages, for example, child abuse and neglect and pre-delinquent behavior. Many of the examples used here relate to assessing the family system and other larger systems and discussing the child's relationship to those systems. In such a way, the student is equipped to carry out full assessments and planning in their practice course and in the field.

Research

The goal of the social work research course is to provide students with a beginning understanding of social work research concepts for both the production and consumption of research in the field. Units of study are devoted to needs assessments, program evaluations and

evaluating one's own practice through the use of single subject studies. The major assignment of the semester is to write a research proposal for a program evaluation.

The permanency planning study has been used extensively in the research course. Students have the option between completing the research proposal or undertaking specific tasks on ongoing projects. Over the last year, several students have chosen to work on the permanency planning study. Activities have included coding, entering data, writing the SPSSX program, cleaning data and removing statistical procedures. This type of direct involvement in research has proven invaluable to the students.

All the students in the research class have been exposed to the study - examples are used to illustrate questionnaire construction (and the identification of problems that could result from this step of the research process), coding, and the computer analysis. A data set from this study was given to analyze as part of a computer exercise in the use of SPSSX. In addition, in discussions of the ethics of research, the study provided some excellent examples of ensuring confidentiality, informed consent and the dissemination of findings. Finally, the study has provided an excellent example of research utilization - how findings from research can directly impact on practice - a lesson which, without current, relevant and available data, is hard to teach and learn.

Policy

Policy curriculum in the BSW program at New Mexico State University is broken into three sections. The first, Introduction to Social Policy, overviews the historical development of social policy and social welfare, the second course, Social Policy II, overviews social legislation on a nuts and bolts level, and Policy III includes policy analysis and administration. Within each of these courses, child welfare legislation and the historical development of child welfare legislation is reviewed not only on national but a state level. The legislation on the federal level includes Public Law 96-272, the Adoption Assistant Child Welfare Act of 1980, Public Law 95-608, the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, and at a state level, the Children's Code of New Mexico and the Adoption Act, including the termination of parental rights sections. The students are also exposed to the use of litigation as a way of changing policy through the ACLU suit, and family policy analysis.

Practice Courses

The three practice courses in the BSW curriculum cover information collection, assessment and planning, and intervention and termination with individual, family, group and community systems. These skills are taught within a generalist practice model. In the individual and family practice areas, students are exposed to a number of case situations drawn from child and family service settings.

Many of these relate to keeping abused and neglected children in their own homes or returning them as quickly as possible if they have been removed. Students are soon confronted with the realization that if in-home services are required to meet these goals, few are available. Within the state, as is the case with many states, there are cut backs in monies for homemakers, parent aides, child care, and psychological services. Therefore, a key to the practice course is dealing with the reality of carrying out permanency planning without substantial support services being available in the community.

In the data collection stage, students learn how to solicit information, combining investigation and treatment roles, and how to supplement their data collection with information from medical, psychiatric, psychological and legal experts. A critical part of the data collection is stressing the necessity for a sensitivity to and understanding of the cultures of the Southwest. This includes the use of case examples from different ethnic and racial groups, and the use of one text devoted totally to working with minority cultures.

The second practice course covers assessment and planning and is tied closely to knowledge gained in the human behavior and social environment course, allowing students to differentiate among families, and assess the severity of the problems that the families may be facing. One example includes the students being confronted with the

decision of whether a nine year old Navajo child found in an urban setting with teenage boys at 10:00 p.m., constitutes neglect, and to what degree. Within this scenario, they must be able to assess human development within a cultural context, and the appropriate service for this now urban Navajo family.

In order to identify the correct resources for social brokering and an effective permanency plan, students are taught to complete an early and complete assessment, complete a differential diagnosis and determine how to build an effective action system (Pincus and Minahan, 1973) or team. Part of this course, also, includes appropriate process recording and documentation for use in court and preparation of testimony that will be appropriate in a court setting. The case planning aspects with individuals and families reflects the overall permanency planning criteria. The federal consent degree outlines are used by the instructor to formulate cases and appropriate plans for case examples.

The third course in this sequence covers intervention across various size systems, examples used include working with abused, neglected children in foster care, and dealing with issues such as separational loss. Students role play these cases on video tape and then they are critiqued in class by other students and the instructor. Included in this intervention course is a discussion of legal strategies for families that do not respond to intervention, including

building a case for the termination of parental rights and providing the documentation for moving a child to a permanent adoptive family. Some students also conduct adoption home studies and role play these on video tape. The use of groups for training special needs adoptive parents and teenagers for emancipation is also used in this course.

Field Internships

Many of the field agency settings provide opportunities for students to apply and practice knowledge and skills learned in the classroom regarding permanency planning. Settings which relate directly to this issue include the human service department, group homes, mental health centers and hospitals.

Special Topics Courses

During the past seven years, the social work program has been able to obtain the Title IV B - 426 funds for teaching and traineeships for students preparing to work in child and family services, or for those who are already employed in this area. A large part of the reason why the program has been able to obtain these funds is due to the special topics course devoted to content on child and family services.

These courses, one of which is offered each semester, include those entitled Family and Child Welfare Services, Child Abuse and Neglect, and Legal Issues in Child Welfare. All these courses, in the last couple of years, have drawn

heavily on the permanency planning study for case examples and to illustrate policy and practice issues in the field of child welfare.

In addition to taking one of the special topics courses, the students receiving traineeships are required to take a placement which provides an opportunity to apply the generalist practice model within a children/family context. Children and family services is interpreted very broadly, and has included placements with social services on the Apache Reservation, in a mental health hospital setting, social services in a military setting, and working with senior citizens and their families at the city senior citizen's center.

SUMMARY

Although the intent of the 1984 permanency planning study was not directed to the child welfare curriculum, this program has been able to utilize it across all courses, and within a generalist practice model framework. Through case examples, students learn critical aspects of permanency planning in the practice courses. The policy implications come into sharp focus with the discussion of key child welfare legislation and the federal court system's consent decrees. The students, through manipulation of the data and data analysis, are able to see how research can directly impact policy change. Within the human behavior and social environment curriculum, the necessity for understanding the theories of child and family development and their

application to practice are illustrated through findings from this study. Finally, the department has been able to obtain federal funding for traineeships by providing a focus on the field of child welfare.

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